

IV. EULOGY

“Albert F. Potter was a down-to-earth pioneer livestock man from the Southwest. He was the first westerner to hold a high post in the U.S. Forest Service. He organized the service’s grazing policies and remained in charge of this vital work for 19 years. Grazing was the most important first use made of the federal forest reserves, and it remained the most controversial for the longest time.” (Davis 1983, 546)

Perhaps no eulogy is more fitting than that written by Will Barnes:

Seldom has any man had greater opportunities to do real constructive work on broad national and conservation lines as was offered Mr. Potter when he entered the work of the old Bureau of Forestry and few men in the Government service have surpassed him in their record of accomplishment. Here was an empire of public land which for many years had been ravaged and ravished by the herds of the western stockmen. Its once splendid forage cover was almost gone, and erosion was tearing from the denuded mountain sides millions of tons of fertile soil, leaving only bare rocks and ruined meadows. On these areas millions of cattle, sheep, and other domestic animals were grazing where, when, and how they pleased. For many years the stockmen had used the public lands without let or hindrance. They felt it was theirs to use as they wished. They talked of “rights” obtained by such use and scoffed at any scheme of Government control over these lands even while they reluctantly admitted that unless some form of control were exercised the very existence of their business was threatened. Thus from the very inception of his work Mr. Potter faced a hostile and aggressive lot of stockmen who sought by every possible means to prevent the accomplishment of his plans for handling the situation.

Keenly alive to the need for co-operation with the stockmen, he promptly gave them a share of the responsibility of management, as fair a share as was possible and still retain in the hands of the Forest officers the final decisions as to principles and details of operation. It was not long before the tide changed and the stockmen, won over by his absolute honesty of purpose and good judgment, began to realize that in his hands their interests were safe and that the future of the livestock industry would improve rather than be injured by friendly co-operation in handling the grazing on the National Forests.

It is also notable that although Mr. Potter came into the Service as a practical stockman, he never allowed his enthusiasm for the Branch of Grazing and the interest of the stockmen to cause him to lose sight of the fact that the National Forests were primarily established for forest purposes and not as grazing commons. In all his management plans he has not failed to recognize the fact that the reproduction of the forests came first in any scheme of use and that the stockmen must accept this idea as fundamental and inviolable.

Mr. Potter has indeed been a pioneer. He has blazed out a trail which will never be effaced, and as long as the forests stand, his work will remain as a monument to his persistency, tact, good judgment, and broadness of vision. (Barnes 1920, 213)

Today, 100 years after Albert F. “Bert” Potter entered government service, we continue to ride Potter’s trails. The National Forests continue to endure. Landscapes have changed, but many of the policies, regulations, and procedures he and his associates established for the Forest Service have been maintained and provide for the sustainable use of the resources. His management style and leadership example provide a “model” that can still be envied today.

If it were not for men like Albert Potter, the Forest Service and National Forests might be significantly different today. Never one of Pinchot’s “Yale” insiders, Potter represented the “grass roots” west.

While Chief of Grazing (1905 to 1916), Potter’s most significant contribution was his ability to flesh out the concepts of managing grazing on the open rangelands of the western forests and to apply them to the real world. He also understood that the first priority was to establish the system by which these lands would be regulated. Today, he might be considered as being too easy on livestock men, but that was a necessity of the time to achieve acceptance of the National Forest system. His understanding of the western livestock industry was unique and fortunate. (Johnson 2005)

Vastly different in personality than Gifford Pinchot, who was tenacious and often characterized as “antagonistic,” Albert Potter emerged as a survivor. Following the dismissal of Pinchot in 1910, Potter and Henry Graves formed the second echelon of Forest Service leadership that was to prove the Service could survive through cooperation and stability. It is an artifact of history that Vice Presidents, Associate Chiefs, and the like are overlooked and forgotten by history. However Potter’s tenure as Associate Chief (1910 – 1920) and his contributions cannot be ignored. Problems persisted but the Forest Service emerged stronger and more unified as a land management agency.

Albert Potter was a man who lived to be 85 years old. He was born before the Civil War; and saw the west settled by Indian wars, cowboys, gunfighters, sheep men, and cattlemen. He saw the transformation from horse and steam power to the automobile and airplane. And he saw government and natural resource management progress from one of apathy, overuse, and corruption to professionalism and dedication as exemplified by the early Forest Service. It was a time and place that will never be again, and range managers of today and the future should be certain that at that particular time, we had the right man in the right place.